

Count Dracula's Great Love was the first of two back-to-back collaborations between Naschy and director/co-writer Javier Aguirre (the other being *The Hunchback of the Morgue*); and Aguirre quickly seized on the opportunity to put his own stamp on classic vampire imagery. Tributes to past works are evident throughout: a dream sequence presented in negative image honors Murnau's *Nosferatu*; while the Hammer Films cycle (which had all but run its course by this time) receives its due with both ornate interiors and, of course, the loving and lingering photography of the four leading ladies in (and out of) sleek dresses and elegant nightgowns. Yet Aguirre establishes and maintains his own distinctive style throughout, starting with a memorable opening title sequence in which an early victim is seen tumbling down the castle steps in a perpetual scroll . . . a little more slowly each time. Shot on a fraction of a typical Hammer budget, the film falls short of technical perfection, particularly during the frequent "noche Americano" (day-for-night) shots; while the ill-advised inclusion of a slide-whistle sound effect sabotages one of the creepier scenes (that said, the eerie, atypical score by Carmelo Bernaola remains a major plus). These complaints are quite minor, however, in the context of the film's overall effect and its unique place in Naschy's filmography.

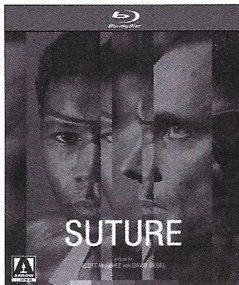
Aguirre's film was released in Spain in a par-for-the-course alternate version which substituted 'clothed' takes for the considerable nudity (male and female) seen elsewhere. The movie was especially well-received in France (though it would soon be eclipsed in popularity by the subsequent—and far nastier—*Hunchback*). The American theatrical release came and went without notice, but the film continued to play the drive-ins for years as one of several pictures hiding under the generic title *Cemetery Girls* (a text-only television commercial sternly warned viewers about the controversial and graphic content of the movie they couldn't actually show you any scenes from). An artlessly and bluntly censored print was eventually syndicated on U.S. television and was advertised without the "*Count*" in the title; and *TV Guide* added insult to injury by citing the "unexpected humor" provided by the English dubbing in its capsule description. Sure enough, my first viewing of the film was preceded by the announcement "Tonight, the Count bites the dust in the comedy *Dracula's Great Love!*" There's also an Elvira-hosted version available on video.

To make matters even more frustrating for the aspiring Naschy historian, the eventual Gorgon Video VHS release featured the same cut TV print. But it wasn't long before the film's U.S. public domain status saw to it that the uncensored version soon became available through various mail order sites and survived through the end of the tape-trading era into the digital generation. Nevertheless, the definitive release of *Count Dracula's Great Love* has been saved until now, and it comes to you through Vinegar Syndrome in its fully-restored, richly colorful widescreen glory with no options left unexplored.

The main feature is presented in its common 'international' English-dubbed version. And while the 'clothed' Spanish version hasn't been made available here, the Spanish-language soundtrack has been provided as an alternate selection (listeners are warned about the inferior sound quality in advance, and the English dub takes over for the sequences censored from the Spanish release). Optional subtitles in English and Spanish are also offered. The original English-language trailer (not the *Cemetery Girls* spot) is included along with a stills gallery and an 8m interview with actress Mirta Miller (whose long career included such additional Naschy titles as *Vengeance of the Zombies* and *Dr. Jekyll and the Wolfman*). An eight-page booklet by expert Naschy-phile Mirek Lipinski is also part of the package. But the biggest treat of all is the emergence of a never-before-released feature audio commentary conversation between Paul Naschy and Javier Aguirre! Indeed, the difficulties involved in getting this film definitively released on video (especially as opposed to *Hunchback*) becomes one of several major topics the two discuss as they happily watch their creation decades after the fact. Some things they remember as if they'd taken place the day before; other observations come as fresh surprises; and each participant attempts to restrain himself (not always successfully) from jumping on a story that 'belongs' to the other. It's a talk the likes of which we didn't even know existed (and of course, English subtitles for the commentary are on hand, even if they don't establish just who is speaking at any given moment), and it catapults this already lavish release into definite Disc of the Year territory.

Sadly, Paul Naschy didn't live to see this release. But his family continues to honor his legacy—and his son, Sergio Molina, would like to address the readers of *Scream* personally at this time. Sergio: "I'm very proud that we can finally watch this movie in the best condition. My gratitude to Vinegar Syndrome for this great job; and I hope that more of my father's best movies arrive in the U.S. in this quality. Thank you so much to the American fans for continuing to support my father's work!"

Shane M. Dallmann



SUTURE

Directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel
(1993) Arrow Films Blu-ray / DVD combo

"Identical" twin brothers, Clay (Dennis Haysbert) and Vincent (Mel Harris) are reunited at their father's funeral. Told by everyone that they look remarkably alike, Clay is down-to-earth, blue-collar and pays his own way. Vincent is a cultured, privileged wastrel accustomed to luxury. And, oh yes, Clay is played by an African-American who is a good six inches taller and far beefier than the Caucasian, reed-thin Vincent. Taking Clay to his chi-chi Phoenix apartment, Vincent outfits him in a borrowed suit. Begging that Clay drop him off at the nearby airport, Vincent later detonates a car bomb as his brother drives away. It's later revealed that Vincent is the chief suspect in their father's burglary break-in murder, and Vincent's attempted murder of Clay—while Clay is driving his car and wearing his clothes is intended to provide a steadfast alibi for Vincent as he hastily makes himself scarce.

Life is complicated, however, and Clay survives the bombing—where he is attended to by doctors, surgeons and psychiatrists who now, with the best of intentions, try to ease Clay back into the life and identity of Vincent's. Overall, *Suture*, lensed in ravishing black-and-white by cinematographer Greg Gardiner is a throwback to such noir-tinged thrillers as *Seconds* (1966), *The Face of Another* (1966) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). Its main plot twist—other than the obvious one with twin identical brothers being played by white and black actors, lies in how Clay's false identity begins to work in his favor. Characters in similar situations are usually plunged into existential angst. Following his attempted murder, Clay meets and falls in love with his plastic surgeon (Dina Merrill) and suddenly becomes accessible to his brother's many millions. *Suture's* story takes on many dark twists and turns, but in Clay's remarkable instance, losing his life paves the way for far bigger and better things.

Writer Michael Weldon assiduously kept all film criticism from sneaking into his reviews for *Psychotronic Video* magazine during its lengthy run. One of the most notable exceptions was when he declared *Suture* as "one of the most boring and pretentious movies that I have ever seen!" The project is a little bit too self-congratulatory in its chief conceit of everyone treating the highly dissimilar actors as twins. As it has been pointed out elsewhere, director Luis Buñuel had previously used similar tactics. More recently, director Todd Solondz used eight different actors of varying ages, races and genders to play the put-upon heroine of *Palindromes* (2004). *Suture* opened the door for more independent and offbeat film fare in mainstream theaters in the 1990s—and has more than a few cards up its sleeve to make it worthwhile. Viewers must agree to settle for a slow yet stylish tale that in spite of its many flourishes betrays the unsteady hands of first-time directors Scott McGehee and David Siegel.

Siegel and McGehee made few films afterward, *Suture* being their main calling card to the motion picture industry. On this Arrow Video Blu ray release, Siegel and McGehee are joined with producer Steven Soderbergh for a full-length audio commentary. The disc also includes the 32-minute documentary, "Lacerations: The Making of *Suture*." Among the many stories related by Siegel and McGehee talk is how they courted the many filmmakers they admired for advice on their debut feature. We learn that Gus Vos Sant was the only who replied, with a self-typewritten reply wishing them the best of luck. Actors Haysbert, Mel Harris, Sab Shimono—strangely wooden and awful as Clay's psychiatrist all weigh in with their recollections of the shoot. Cinematographer Gardiner, composer Cary Berger, editor Lauren Zuckerman, and production designer Kelly McGehee also relate stories about their own contributions to the project.

The disc also includes three short deleted scenes, one of which depicts Haysbert and Merrill sitting down to a telecast of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In an extremely "meta" scene, Merrill explains how the film suddenly turns from black-and-white to color—within the context of film deliberately shot in black-and-white, and relates a story on how her father drove her crazy with the trivial tidbit on how he could identify the three animal actors that played Toto! It's an extremely clever, referential scene that likely hit the cutting room floor for being "too obvious."

The real treat on the disc for cinephiles is the 30-minute plus documentary "Birds Past," wherein the two filmmakers set out for Bodega Bay to retrace the steps of actress Tippi Hedren in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). Not using a single film clip or movie still, McGehee and Siegel visit old shooting locations and crowd the short feature with talking head interview footage of random people talking relating their own faulty memories of the horror classic. The interview subjects—ranging from savvy fashion designers to Bodega Bay natives to woebegone street people chip in with their impressions. We learn that most of the locations in the film have since been torn down, with the exception of the school where the deadly avian playground attack took place. "Bird's Past" is both hilarious and poignant and a testament to the shared memory that popular cinema provides us. This feature alone makes the disc a must-have.

The disc includes both U.S. and European theatrical trailers, a stills gallery, and reversible art featuring both the original poster along with a new cover design by marko phntm. In summation, *Suture* is an early example of a movie-mad generation paying homage to their cinematic forebears before Quentin Tarantino would enter the scene with *Reservoir Dogs* (1992).

Greg Goodsell